

A Natural Progression
Annette Elowitch's Interview Transcript
Collected and Edited¹ by Eliza Lambert

In Association with the Maine Jewish Museum
and Documenting Maine Jewry

“There was a whole Jewish section in Portland, the bakery, the deli, the grocery store, right on Newbury Street, parallel to Congress Street and near the synagogue, where the Maine State Museum.”

¹ Note to the reader: Narratives and transcripts have been recorded and compiled to show the slang and quirks of speech inherent in every narrator.

ELIZA LAMBERT: Annette, thank you so much for meeting with me today. I'm really excited to discuss the Maine Jewish Museum with over Facetime on March 6th, at 2pm.

ANNETTE ELOWITCH: Yup.

EL: Yeah. First, what I wanted to start off with today, is if you could talk to me about what growing up was like for you, in Maine.

AE: Well, it was quite amazing because it was very separate. The Jews, Irish and Italians, we all grew up on Munjoy Hill together. But our lives were separate in that our social life was completely Jewish and at the Jewish Community Center, which was on Cumberland Avenue in Portland. We were together in school, had buddies, had buddies, but the bottom line was we were separate.

EL: Yeah.

AE: Yeah. You wouldn't date anybody that wasn't Jewish. If you dated someone that wasn't Jewish it was a big thing.

EL: What sort of early messages do you think that sent to you about that it meant to be Jewish?

AE: My parents were immigrants, so they spoke Yiddish, only Yiddish at home. My grandmother lived with us and it was just, that was just the way it was.

EL: Where did your parents immigrate from?

AE: They came from Poland and then they met in Cuba. Then they stayed in Cuba because there was a quota and they couldn't get into the United States, so they stayed there for several years. Let me see. My sister was born there in Cuba in 1932 and they came over four years later when she was four.

EL: When were you born?

AE: '42.

EL: How much did you hear about your parent's immigration, growing up?

AE: Quite a bit.

EL: Yeah. Would you mind talking to me a little bit about that? What was that process like for them?

AE: No. It was a very nice thing. It was really good. They were happy to be in America. But one interesting story: There was a whole Jewish section in Portland, the bakery, the deli, the grocery store, right on Newbury Street, parallel to Congress Street and near the

synagogue, where the Maine State Museum is and also, on Newton, the Newbury Street Synagogue was another Orthodox synagogue. There were only Orthodox synagogues then. A lot of the life was centered around those stores. My mother, I found out just a couple years ago, that my mother worked in the bakery, in the Jewish bakery. I never knew that. My mother is a hundred and a half by the way. I picked her up, I said, "Ma, someone told me that you worked in the bakery. I can't believe that." She said, "Yes, because I could only speak Yiddish and Spanish." Because she spoke Yiddish, she got the job in the bakery because other people spoke Yiddish and it was easy.

EL: Yeah. Wow. They left right before the war, obviously.

AE: Yes. Yes, they did.

EL: How much of those tensions in Europe do you think influenced their decision to leave?

AE: They left because there were pogroms and all those terrible things.

EL: Yeah.

AE: Yeah, like Jews left, they left too.

EL: Yeah. What do you think the process of them leaving was like?

AE: I'm sure it was wrenching. My mother left with her two sisters and her mother. I guess her father had died before they went to Cuba. But they went to Cuba and they waited till they could get into America. They got in because my father's uncle owned a shoe company in Massachusetts, where my father got a job. From Cuba they came to Malden, Massachusetts, where they lived for awhile. Then they came to Portland because my dad's uncle had a factory here and my father could work there. So we moved.

EL: Did you know of a lot of people who came through there?

AE: Well, there were a couple of other Jewish families who came from Cuba. But I don't know if I necessarily knew they were immigrants or - I don't know.

EL: Was your Polish identity prevalent in your household or more so your Jewish identity?

AE: No, they left Poland because Poland was terrible to Jews.

EL: Right, right. Did they tell you a lot of stories about what they experienced there in terms of the pogroms?

AE: My father was very quiet about those things because they were very traumatic for him. He was a man of very few words, so he didn't speak very often about what it was like. Except he did tell me - (laughs) as sort of a confession - that they ate pork.

EL: Oh.

AE: Yes, imagine that. He also told me that - are you Jewish, by the way?

EL: I have Jewish heritage, but on my paternal side.

AE: He told me also that everybody had Sukkot. Do you know what that is?

EL: No, what is that?

AE: During the Sukkot's time, in the fall, they have it at temples and other orthodox people or other people have - it's like a little house that you eat in in the fall that's sort of a makeshift dwelling. My father told me that everyone there had one and it was sort of like you rolled it down on a pulley system. They all had it. Even though they ate pork! They still celebrated the Jewish customs. I'm sure the towns were all Jews.

EL: Why did he eat pork? What were the circumstances?

AE: I don't know. He said they ate pork. I guess his father raised animals and they ate pork, which is this huge confession for a Jew.

EL: Yeah, absolutely. Were you raised in a household with Kosher eating rules?

AE: Yes. It was Kosher. Because my grandmother lived with us, mostly. But also we're not able to go out to restaurants and stuff. We weren't actually poor, but I guess we were poor. I didn't know that we were poor because there were others Jews around me that were of the same circumstance, but we never went to restaurants unless relatives came from out of town and took us to 'em. We were Kosher in the house. I don't know if we exactly had different dishes, you know, for milk and meat. But I remember, during Passover, my mother would go down to the basement and bring up a whole new set of dishes, because that's what you did at Passover. That.

EL: Excellent. And what other Jewish traditions did your family adhere to growing up?

AE: Mostly Passover. I was telling my son the other day - we used to, we didn't go to school the first two days and the last two days of Passover because that was the holidays. That was the religious part of the holidays. But our life wasn't that much centered around the Synagogue, I have to say.

EL: Were you Orthodox?

AE: Well, everything was Orthodox. There was no Conservative or Reform movement then in Portland. It was all Orthodox. There were three synagogues around the Maine Jewish Museum. There was one on Newbury Street. There was that Etz Chaim and then on Cumberland Avenue there was another one called, Anshe Sfard. Jews split up along God knows what. I think, you know, there were a lot of people that had fights with certain relatives so one would get mad and leave and start their own congregation.

EL: Yeah.

AE: I think Etz Chaim, somebody told me that it was a church first.

EL: Was it?

AE: That's what someone told me.

EL: Huh. Which temple did your family belong to?

AE: To Shaarey Tphiloh, which is on Newbury Street, so two blocks away from Etz Chaim. That's where my family, that's where we went to synagogue. That synagogue built a temple on Noyes Street in the Woodford section. It was very desirable for Jews of means to move to that part of town in Dartmouth Street, Noyes Street. For some reason that was like the Holy Grail of where you could live, if you had the means. Shaarey Tphiloh had the congregation on Newbury Street as well as one on Noyes Street, where, by the way, my husband and I got married fifty years ago.

EL: Correct me if I'm wrong - what I'm hearing is it sounds like the Jewish community in some ways was separated by wealth?

AE: That's a little harsh, I'm not sure. I don't think so, really. Some of the Jews that moved in the '50s split off from the Orthodox and started Temple Beth El, which was Conservative. But it wasn't until fifteen years ago, there was no Reform movement in the state.

EL: Oh, okay. Did you ever consider joining the Conservative or maybe the Reform?

AE: We did, we belong to the Temple Beth El because that's where my husband's family belongs, to the conservative synagogue. My parents eventually joined too, because they wanted to be where I was.

EL: That's so excellent of them. Can you tell me how those two traditions differ?

AE: I don't know if there's many people that go to the Orthodox synagogue at all, as a matter of fact. I know that their last Rabbi – Akiva Herzfeld - his family moved to Israel.

EL: Oh.

AE: I don't know what goes on there, I really don't. There is the Hasidic part that Moshe Leansky - do you know about him?

EL: I've heard his name before.

AE: Yeah. Well, he's got a maybe fifteen or twenty families that join him, and that's very orthodox. It has nothing to do with the synagogue, I think it's just his own little synagogue at his house. I think he has services there. Shabbat and maybe holidays, but I don't know. But we're very separate from the Temple. Now that our kids are grown, my husband hates religion of any sort. We're nominal members of the Temple Beth El, but not exactly. I mean, I don't go very much. Every once and awhile we would go, but rarely.

EL: Why does he hate religion, if you don't mind me asking?

AE: Why does he hate religion? Because he thinks it's the reason of all the bad things that happen in the world. Just because of religion. He's probably right.

EL: Do you agree?

AE: I do.

EL: And has that influenced -

AE: He identifies with Jewish, absolutely. He does support Israel mostly, I would say, though we have our differences and we're not sure how we feel about them these days.

EL: I suppose - why do you think you're not sure how you feel about them these days?

AE: About religion? I don't know. My kids have moved away, so I don't have a reason to call my kids, my grandchildren aren't at Hebrew School there. But I still feel some sense, that said. If someone said, "Where do you belong?" I would say, "Temple Beth El." I do go to Etz Chaim for some services during the High Holidays.

EL: Okay. I've heard, in doing these interviews, I've heard a lot of this distinction between being religiously Jewish and culturally Jewish.

AE: Yeah.

EL: How do you relate to that statement?

AE: Definitely, I feel culturally Jewish and religiously Jewish too. I'm Jewish. I wear a Star of David around my neck every single day.

EL: What makes you feel Jewish? What does it mean to have that identity for you?

AE: I like the traditions of it. I like the feeling of being Jewish. I really do. I always have.

EL: Going back to your childhood - what are some of your earliest memories of identifying with Judaism and what that meant?

AE: I did go to Hebrew School for a couple of years. It was an Orthodox Hebrew School. Those years, Jewish girls could not have their bat mitzvah. But the people who split off from the Orthodox and joined Temple Beth El, which was conservative, did have their girls have a bat mitzvah, whereas in the Orthodox they did not. They had a confirmation or something, but never a bat mitzvah. I know I'm veering off the subject, but once I start thinking about something -

EL: Yeah.

AE: I go off on a tangent, so you have to put me back to where you want me to be.

EL: I absolutely will, that's just a really interesting detail, I would hate to not get that on tape. When did you have your bat mitzvah?

AE: I didn't have one. I never had one.

EL: Oh, okay.

AE: Because we were not yet members of the Temple Beth El, where they did confirm Jewish girls. My friends all did. They didn't have them individually, but they had them in the class. But, of course, my children went to Hebrew School at Temple Beth El and they both had bat and bar mitzvahs.

EL: What are the genders of your children, I guess?

AE: I have a boy and a girl.

EL: What was it like to see your daughter go through that confirmation process.

AE: So great. It was great. It was really great. But, unfortunately, my father died two weeks before my son's batmitzvah, so his bar mitzvah is kind of cloudy for me. But it meant a lot to him, it really did. And to us, too.

EL: Great. What other Jewish traditions did your family practice in the home?

AE: We had seders during Passover and a lot of it was centered at the Jewish community center, where they had activities and as we, in junior high and high school, we had something called the Inter-center Weekend, where Jews from all over the state got together. There were Jews in Bangor and Augusta and small towns too. We'd all get together, there in Portland for a weekend of events.

EL: That's so great. What did that feel like? How would you characterize that Jewish community that you were experiencing?

AE: It was great, it was great. Very close and fun. I don't think that exists now. I'm not sure.

EL: Yeah.

AE: Yeah, I don't know what it's like for young Jewish families. But I think, you know what I think? I think the Reformed synagogue is extremely extremely active and have many many members. Because they're very inclusive. Not that other synagogues aren't, but they have a lot of gay people, converts, families, split families, where maybe only one parent relates, calls themselves Jewish. I think that's where it's at. Membership. And also, Etz Chaim, which I think is fantastic. People're paying to go there, though, that's the problem with Etz Chaim. I know they're having financial difficulties. I don't pay anything, either, because it's free and there's a wonderful speaker during Rosh Hashanah where I go. I've given them a contribution, but it's really not something that could sustain them on any level.

EL: Yeah. Yeah. That's complicated.

AE: Yeah. They don't really have a payment structure or whatever. But I think the Reform temple is where it's at, where it's happening.

EL: What would you say the characteristics of a 'happening' temple are?

AE: Many people. Many events. I mean, they have a gay rabbi and they're very inclusive. Not that Beth El isn't inclusive because it - I think a lot depends on the Rabbi, if people like the Rabbi or don't. I think that the Rabbi at the Reform temple, the previous one and the one now, are particularly popular with young people, young families. I think it's going strong.

EL: Excellent. Well, that's good to hear. In that vein, I would ask you how the Jewish community has changed from when you were growing up in Maine?

AE: I'm not really that connected because my kids, as I said, my kids are moved away and I'm not really that connected to the Temple or Jewish things, particularly.

EL: Do you think, had you raised your children when you were growing up here, that that would have been something that likely to happen to a Jewish family, to not be as connected to the Jewish community?

AE: Growing up, I think people were connected, very connected, but I think in the last ten to fifteen to twenty years, maybe, people are less connected.

EL: Why do you think that is?

AE: I really don't know. I don't know. I think it has to do with the rabbi, I really do. I think people at Temple Beth El are mixed about how they feel about Rabbi Braun, who is a very nice person. I don't know if she has the gravitas to, how you say, the intellectual Jews. Cuz a lot of my friends, who are my age, in the 70s, maybe even a little older, are very mixed about Beth El and I think most of them are really interested in Etz Chaim. Whereas the younger, family-oriented people go to the Reform. My kids, who recently moved to Massachusetts, they have seven-year-old twins, they belong to the Temple Beth El because they'd done some research, and they really liked that Hebrew School. My son-in-law, in particular, is a convert and has been insistent on his kids receiving a Jewish education, which I'm glad about and my daughter's glad about too. But they were very mixed about Beth El, but happily, in the middle of their deciding what to do with the kids and Hebrew School, they moved to Boston and they found a temple that they like very much. They're not, you know, a factor now. My son and daughter-in-law and his kids live in Rockville, Maryland. He, I would say, he flirted with Orthodoxy during his college years, which is upsetting to my husband and me. It was really like, to us, going over the deep end. But that's over and he's raising his family with his wife and their two twins go to Temple, which they like very much. He's very involved with his temple.

EL: Good. Cool. Yeah.

AE: Which I'd say, among my peers, their children probably are less involved in Jewish things than our kids. Which is amazing, considering how my husband feels about religion. They're more connected to Jewish things and their synagogues. It's pretty amazing.

EL: Yeah. Absolutely. And what do you think was particular in the way that you raised your children in Judaism that would give them this level of interest and involvement that seems so unusual?

AE: My in-laws, who passed away years ago, were very involved in the Temple and so we were too. My peers were very active in the Temple, so their children and my children were friendly and they, you know, were chums and were in Hebrew School together. But things have changed.

EL: Yeah, absolutely. What do you think about your upbringing made you decide to raise your children in the Jewish faith.

AE: Well, it was never even a question that I would, because I relate to everything Jewish very very strongly. Even, not even, not necessarily the organized part, but I feel very Jewish. That stuff's my husband, right Ron? He can't hear me, he's working in the office next to me. Anyway.

EL: Was there ever a point where you moved out of Maine?

AE: No. No. We lived in New York very briefly when we were first married, but we've lived here ever since. We love it here.

EL: Yeah.

AE: It was great. We thought there was nothing to do here, growing up, but now there's too much to do, if that's possible.

EL: Yeah. Yeah. I absolutely understand that. What did you notice about Maine after you left it?

AE: We knew we wanted to get back. A lot of our friends said, "Let's get out of here, we want to leave." But we didn't realize until we left how great it was.

EL: What did you miss?

AE: We lived in New York City and we really wanted, it's a long story why we left New York but anyway, we're happy that we're back here. We have wonderful friends and they raised their children here too, and we love the city incredibly.

EL: Were you involved in a synagogue when you were in New York briefly?

AE: No, not at all. We didn't even have time to think of that. We didn't have kids at that time, I think having children is an impetus for people to belong to synagogues or churches, whatever. But we were just newly married, so it wasn't until after our kids were born, when they were six or seven, went to Hebrew School at Temple Beth El, like my friends kids did.

EL: Yeah. Wow. What do you think - how did you get re-involved in the Jewish community when you came back to Maine?

AE: Well, for our kids and for the Temple. You know what was a big impetus? When we first moved back here, Temple Beth El had this amazing art show, which was the best one north of Boston. It was totally volunteer, but it was an incredibly wonderful show. Since we were interested in the arts, we got involved in that show and eventually were chairmen of one year of it. It was fantastic. It ran for ten years, it was really terrific. Really, very strong show.

EL: That's really awesome.

AE: We became art dealers, it was like a natural progression. Maybe because of that we're art dealers, I don't know.

EL: Yeah. How did you start art dealing?

AE: We moved back to Portland. We became involved in the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. It's a very influential school, very select. It's a summer school in Skowhegan, Maine, and we became involved in fundraising for them. We became very close to the founder and director, Bill Cummings. Through our association with him, my husband was working for his dad in the tire business, in the family business, and though he did love his father and his uncles and his cousins, he wasn't very fulfilled in his job. Because of our association with the Skowhegan School, we decided to open a gallery. My husband left the family business and we opened a gallery, and we've been doing it ever since.

EL: How nice, that's really excellent.

AE: Yeah, yeah, we love it.

EL: Yeah.

AE: We don't have a physical gallery anymore, but we have an auction house, and we have auctions twice a year, art auctions.

EL: Oh, excellent. What are some ways in your life that you have engaged in the Jewish community?

AE: Wait a sec, I'm just watching my dog on the snow-laden terrace and seeing what he's doin', just one second.

EL: Okay. (Laughs.)

AE: Don't wanna let him fall over the edge, you know?

EL: Yeah. (Laughs.)

AE: Okay, ask me again what you said?

EL: What are some ways that you were involved in the Jewish community in your life?

AE: As I said, because of our kids, we were involved in the Temple and because of the art show we were involved in the Temple. But we don't have that involvement in anything anymore.

EL: Growing up, did you take leadership positions in anything in particular?

AE: Maybe during our teenage years, maybe.

EL: Yeah, yeah.

AE: Yeah, during those days, there were sororities and fraternities.

EL: Yeah.

AE: And we were involved in those and we did hold leadership positions.

EL: Were they -

AE: They were an all-Jewish fraternity and sorority.

EL: Okay.

AE: In high school, the Jews sat at one table and everyone else sat on other tables. There still was that separation. I was involved with an all, you know, a non-Jewish club, let's say. We still, the Jews were with the Jews and the non-Jews were by themselves.

EL: Yeah. Wow.

AE: Yup.

EL: What did that mean to you?

AE: It was just sort of how it was.

EL: Yeah.

AE: We didn't realize we were so separated, stuff we did because this whole other thing that Jews were discriminated against in some institutions in Portland, like the Cumberland Club, the Portland Country Club, Proud's Neck, where Jews weren't allowed to go. In those ways we felt separate because we weren't allowed to go to those places.

EL: Yeah. That seems -

AE: Terrible.

EL: Terrible, yeah. It also seems like discrimination.

AE: Oh, yeah, definitely. Definitely. Jews couldn't go to those places.

EL: Why do you think that was? What were the biases?

AE: People were dumb. People were dumb, I don't know. It's horrible.

EL: What do you think their bias was? What do you think their concerns were?

AE: I don't know. I really don't know. What about us did they not like? I don't know. But people don't like Jews, people don't like Irish. I don't know. I really don't know.

EL: But you also grew up post-World War II. Did that seem to really affect the thinking that people were having about issues of anti-Semitism?

AE: I don't really know. I don't remember. It was like a statement of fact that there were certain places we couldn't go.

EL: Has that changed, do you think?

AE: Oh yes, definitely.

EL: Why do you think it's changed?

AE: Definitely. We can do anything. I think that people became aware of how terrible it was. We were friends with a couple, a long time ago we went on their boat in Nassau, we were chatting with them. They could not believe that we couldn't belong to the Portland Country Club. Even though they belonged there, they had no idea that people were discriminated against because of their religion. We lived in Yarmouth when our daughter was little, and we wanted to move into Portland. We met this couple, who're older than us. They owned a row of apartments in the West End. We were chatting with them about the fact that we wanted to move into Portland from Yarmouth, and they said - we wanted to rent something because we didn't know where we'd like to live. They suggest, they said, "Oh, you know, there's a place next to us that's for rent. You should really take a look at it." We said, "We can't go there. "what do you mean?" They said. "No, Jamie Brown, your person who owns that company, doesn't allow Jews." They were absolutely horrified, just visibly shaken by it. They had no idea. Then, the next day, they called to say they had talked to the owners, Jamie Brown, and they said, "You can be sure you can move in anytime you want to." They were really really horrified. But we never did. But anyway, slowly but surely, things changed for the better and people were accepted to go anywhere they wanted to. But it was painful in our youth, knowing that we couldn't go to certain places.

EL: Yeah. Absolutely.

AE: I don't know if it - in retrospect, it may have made a big impact, but it was just the way it was. Somehow, this is the way it is. I didn't think about it that much.

EL: I mean, as it started to change, do you think that was because people had growing awareness.

AE: Maybe. I know there were Jews that became active in the museum board and the Portland Symphony, and in the cultural community. Maybe that's when things changed.

EL: Do you think, in some ways, maybe you were a part of encouraging and ushering along that change also?

AE: Yes, I think so, yes.

EL: Since you're involved in the cultural community...

AE: Yup. That's right.

EL: Did you personally face a lot of prejudice growing up?

AE: No. Really not. Just when we were together. And separate. I didn't think about it that much. Or at all.

EL: But as you started to be more of an adult and enter the work force, especially in the creative industry, did you notice discrimination?

AE: No, I don't - no.

EL: Yet you notice it when it's not there. What do you think that says about bias?

AE: It's the evolution of society, you know?

EL: Absolutely.

AE: Yup.

EL: Something that I really wanted to talk to you about was how you had the opportunity to do a series of interviews that were eventually catalogued on Documenting Maine Jewry, among other uses. Can you tell me how you got involved with that process -

AE: Because of Harris Gleckman. Do you know Harris?

EL: Yes, we've been in touch, he's wonderful.

AE: He's so fantastic. It's all him. He did it all, really. He's so incredible. It's because of him that I got involved doing those interviews, which are amazing because they're going to be there forever.

EL: Forever! Yeah.

AE: My grandchildren, my great-grandchildren will always be able to hear - my father-in-law's there, my mother, my sister, my sister-in-law - that's important to them, will be there forever because it's at the Portland Public Library, Maine Historical. Whatever. They can go online and hear interviews of their relatives.

EL: It's really wonderful.

AE: Fantastic.

EL: What were some of your largest take-aways from that experience?

AE: I thought doing those interviews was really incredible. I thought it was amazing listening to the generation before me talk about what it was like to grow up here.

EL: Yeah. Absolutely. What were some things you learned that surprised you?

AE: How many people were really really Orthodox. Very Orthodox. Really set. Very Orthodox. That's all they knew, but every generation gets less dogmatic about it, I think.

EL: Yeah, interesting. Why do you think they become less dogmatic?

AE: I don't know. I think the melting pot, you know. I think as we go there's more assimilation and it's easier now, in some ways.

EL: You mean easier to be Jewish?

AE: Yeah. Except, of course, the Israeli thing, which is a big thing. People think Israel is terrible. We're supporters. Culturally we support Israel, but we're very doubtful of the way it's going and we think Netanyahu is terrible. We think the Israeli citizens should stand up and say, "We do want a two-state solution." And get on with it. I hope he's defeated in this election. Who knows if he will. My little dog has been in the kitty litter I see. Rupert, that's bad. Anyway, out back with you.

EL: I guess my question would be, do you think in Maine Israel is a big issue that comes up in the Jewish community?

AE: I think it's a big issue with Jews. We're all brought up thinking that Israel is fantastic and everything was - we were very pro-Israel. We were taught that the land belongs to Israel and the Arabs were second-class citizens. But, of course, we've evolved and we know that it's a very problematic society, right now. My kids generation - we were taught that Israel was everything and that Israel was perfect and great and wonderful. The songs about Israel being pioneers and planting trees. But my daughter's generation is more questioning about it. They've read more, they know that the Arabs have rights too and blah blah. More evolved than we. But we're on their side now, too. [Narrator makes kissing noises to her dog] Come here. I don't know what my dog's doing. Okay, I'm listening.

EL: Okay. Going back to what you were saying earlier about how so many people were Conservative - why did that surprise you at the time?

AE: Because it was really a breaking off from the Orthodox synagogue to the Conservative. It was a big step, it really was. Much less so today. It was new and the Orthodox represented old. Old Jewish and new Jewish.

EL: What do you think are the differences between old Jewish and new Jewish?

AE: Well, as I said, I don't know how many people are members of the Orthodox synagogue. I don't know if they have a lot of people in their membership. They used to, everybody was Orthodox. Or at least, there was only an Orthodox synagogue and that's what you had and that's where, that's what you went to. Until the Conservative synagogue was built and then the Reform temple was built, where most of the action is now, I think.

EL: What didn't surprise you when you were doing the interviews? What was validated about the Jewish community from that time?

AE: That is was warm and cozy.

EL: Can you talk to me a little bit more about that? What do you mean by that?

AE: Because separate made you feel good in a way. You were separate and you had a tight bond with your fellow Jews.

EL: Do you think that still exists?

AE: I'm not sure. Probably not. I don't know, it's not really, you know, things change.

EL: What were some of the most memorable moments in those interviews for you?

AE: Talking to, interviewing my sister, who now has dementia. That was very touching. She was sort of on the edge when I interviewed her. She was the one who was born in Cuba and then came over when she was four. That was very touching, interviewing her about what it was like. She was here during World War II and she could never date anyone who wasn't Jewish. My mother tells the story that she was invited to some prom or something by a non-Jewish guy and how she wouldn't let her and it was a big to-do about that. But now, people aren't separate. I think it's amazing that my husband and me have kids who are very Jewish and very Jewishly connected. Because a lot of my contemporaries, their kids didn't marry Jews and their grandchildren are not Jewish. And to me, it's a lot to me that my grandchildren are Jewish. It really does. My grandson was bar mitzvahed two years ago and we look forward to all the other kids being bar mitzvahed. We had five grandchildren, four of them, actually. One of them, a grandson, who is not Jewish.

EL: Really, wow. That's not bad numbers.

AE: Yeah, well, we have four kids and they'll all have bar mitzvahs for sure.

EL: What do you think brought such high numbers into your family?

AE: I have no idea, I don't know. It's surprising to us actually. Because, I said, our best friends have three kids and none of them are Jewish. My friend's, they birthed two twins

and she isn't even married to the father, though they're engaged. Those kids are not going to be Jews. I asked my friend, I said, "Are they going to have a circumcision?" She said, "No, no, of course not, they won't." Anyway, I'm happy that our kids are Jewishly-connected and that our grandchildren will be Jews.

EL: What's it been like to explore the legacy of the Jewish people who came before you and then also to foster later generations?

AE: I think it's important. It means a lot to me. But our kids have left town, so we don't have that connection with them to a particular synagogue here, because they don't live here. In a couple weeks we're going down to Natick, Mass. where my daughter and son-in-law live to our grandchildren's consecration in their temple. Whatever that means, I don't know, but we're going to it. They're seven, so.

EL: (laughs) Well, that's supportive of you. I wonder, what did it feel like to have such a significant contribution to your Jewish community through doing those interviews?

AE: It means a lot, I just think it's incredible. The fact that it's going to be there forever.

EL: From those interviews, what do you think are some of the most dramatic ways that Maine has changed and the Maine Jewish community has changed?

AE: Oh, it's change tremendously. But Maine is also so huge. When you think of how big it is, and that there's also Jews in Augusta and in Bangor and in Lewiston who support a temple. Yeah. I'm sure, they do. Documenting Maine Jewry is fantastic. It's great.

EL: I would wonder how - you said earlier you were in Lewiston for a time?

AE: No, no no.

EL: Was there a place besides Portland that you were living in Maine?

AE: Nope. We lived in Yarmouth briefly when we moved back from New York but that was just for a few months. We've always lived in Portland.

EL: What brought you to Yarmouth?

AE: We needed, we were back from New York and needed an apartment and my inlaws found us this place in Yarmouth. We moved shortly after, to Portland.

EL: How did you like Yarmouth?

AE: It was okay, but I felt a little isolated, because I'd just had a baby. I always tell people I never took off my pajamas for a year. (Laughs.)

EL: Well, that has it's pros and cons I'm sure.

AE: I wanted to be in Portland, my friends were in Portland. I wanted to live here.

EL: Do you have friends that you've had since childhood, that you've stayed -

AE: Yes. Yes. We do. Our friends who are maybe two or three years older, we're very close to them. And they were all high school sweethearts.

EL: Were they? That's so sweet.

AE: My husband and I were at all.

EL: Where did you meet?

AE: Not only were they high school sweethearts, they've been married at least fifty years and I think they're crazy about each other still. I really do, I think they're all still happily married.

EL: That's so lovely.

AE: It is.

EL: There's something really lovely about that.

AE: It is. We value that a lot.

EL: Which high school did you go to again?

AE: Deering. Deering.

EL: How did you two meet?

AE: Oh, we met in the halls of Deering High School. One day.

EL: How did the romance start?

AE: It was really good. We liked each other. When we first met, it was, my husband was having a feud with his cousin and we were at a party and he was telling me about how he hated his cousin, blah blah blah. We got together in the end. He was in the fraternity, I was in the sorority, and they used to have events together. That's how we really got started.

EL: That's really sweet. Did you know then that you were going to marry him?

AE: No. (Laughs.)

EL: But I guess you found out.

AE: I found out, I did I did.

EL: When you walk through the streets of Portland, what landmarks have changed.

AE: Congress Street used to be really really busy. Hundreds of people everywhere, because there was no mall. There was none of that. There were many many department stores that were really successful, hustle bustle. It seemed like Portland cities were down. People were going to the suburbs, walls were built, etc. I think a big thing that helped Portland get together and be more vibrant is the Maine College of Art, which is on Congress Street and I'm a trustee of the college. I think that they had a lot to do with the revitalization of Portland. Plus, the cultural things that are going on are so much. It's amazing. We said, when we were growing up that there was nothing to do. But now, there's too much to do.

EL: Why do you think there's been that change from nothing to too much?

AE: Different cultural organizations, all the restaurants, the whole vibe of Portland being such an up-and-coming place. People wanna come here. We live right in town. We used to live in the West End of Portland, in a big old house for a long time, but four years ago we moved to an apartment, which is a block away from Congress Street, and we can walk everywhere and we love it.

EL: That sounds amazing.

AE: It's fantastic. We love it here.

EL: Why do you think Harris Gleckman reached out to you?

AE: I don't know. There probably was a few other people who were involved. Documenting Maine Jewry - it's just so great. The people who are on the committee are friends of mine, and I think, I'm so happy that he called me. I really care about it a lot. He's so great. He's really a fantastic person. I wish there was a way that some organization could honor him for the work he's done.

EL: I'm right there with you, believe me. I've been really grateful for all of his help and support.

AE: He's fantastic, he's a great guy.

EL: Do you think your kids enjoyed growing up in Maine?

AE: Yeah. Definitely. My kids loved it. I think they did, very much. I think, if their work took them here, they'd come gladly, because they know it's a great place.